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The Red Sea Rules

10 God-Given Strategies for Difficult Times

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CHAPTER 1

Realize that God means for you to be where you are.

Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to the children of Israel, that they turn and camp before Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, opposite Baal Zephon."

—Exodus 14:1–2

Cul-de-Sacs

The sea was before them, Pharaoh's hosts behind them, and the mountains around them. And all this, be it observed, permitted and ordered of God.

—C. H. Mackintosh

Reba Robinson lay awake night after night, tense and tired in her little room in Starkville, Mississippi. Her imagination raced out of control as her fingers clung to an old T-shirt that had once belonged to her son and still carried the scent of his cologne. He was confronting death in some exotic locale, though she didn't know where or what for, how or by whom.

Dillon was a marine assigned to a covert commando unit. His assignments were so secretive that even his mother could not be told the time or location of his missions.

But her mother's instincts told her when he was in harm's way, and during those times she fervently prayed for Dillon day and night. She was undoubtedly praying the night he swam ten miles from a submarine to the forbidden coast of a hostile country. She was praying the night he parachuted behind enemy lines from a high-flying aircraft. She was praying the day he jumped from a chopper through a hail of bullets, his eyes blinded with tears, to retrieve the body of his fallen compatriot. She was praying the night a terrorist stuck a gun in his face and pulled the trigger; and perhaps it was her prayers that caused the gun to jam, giving Dillon the split second he needed to "resolve the problem" and escape.

She prayed through nocturnal tears and terrors and torments.

When Dillon finally returned home, he was a hero whose bravery could never be explained, declassified, or honored. He couldn't discuss his exploits or seek help in processing his traumas. He tried making the transition from action hero to typical guy, but life slowed to a snail's pace in his little hometown. He began frequenting the local bars, trying not to remember what he couldn't forget.

Reba prayed on.

Like Dillon's mother, we sometimes go through prolonged periods of pain and pressure. Trapped by circumstances. Hurting. Afraid. Facing impossible odds. Traversing long, dark valleys.

Some circumstances are beyond our control, and something as simple as the ringing of a phone, a card in the mail, or a knock on the door can push us off the wire. We fall into a world of worry. Someone defined worry as a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind, cutting a channel into which all other thoughts flow.

The preacher John R. Rice said, "Worry is putting question marks where God has put periods."

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen called worry "a form of atheism, for it betrays a lack of faith and trust in God."

But for some of us, worry seems as inherent as breathing.

We are, after all, likened in the Bible to sheep. I have a small flock of sheep (well, three of them) that live contentedly in our extended backyard. They're well fenced and well fed, and they have little to fear. But they sometimes fear anyway and can bolt in sheer panic at nothing more than a rabbit jumping through the grass.

That isn't a quality the Lord admires in His sheep. He wants us to say, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ..."

Recently, the phone rang in the wee hours. It was my sister, Ann, telling me that Mother had fallen ill, and they were rushing her to the hospital, but with

little hope. Ann suggested I return home immediately. It was a terrible jolt, and an awful dread swept over me. But instantly a verse of Scripture came to mind—Psalm 116:15: *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints*. From that moment, the grip of panic fell away, and I had peace.

Yet at other times, fear doesn't release its tenacious grip so easily. How can you *not* worry, after all, when you have a commando son being secretly inserted into deadly situations around the globe?

How can you *not* worry when your outflow exceeds your income, and the creditors are calling? Or when your financial portfolio is collapsing?

How can you *not* worry when your loved one is diagnosed with cancer?

How can you *not* worry when your job is terminated, your child is troubled, or your safety is at stake?

To put it differently, how can you *not* worry when the Red Sea faces you, the desert surrounds you, and the soldiers of Egypt are speeding toward you with drawn swords?

Just ask Reba Robinson. When amid her anxiety she accepted that God had placed her in that situation, difficult as it was, she began converting her worries into prayers and her fears into faith. She earnestly prayed for her son, trusting God to intervene, to redeem, to help, and to heal.

At a critical juncture in Dillon's life, a friend invited him to a revival meeting in a nearby church. He went grudgingly, intending to bolt as soon as the service was over. But the message struck home that night, and when the altar call was given, Dillon gripped the back of the pew as if trying to choke it. No terrorist had ever pursued him like the Hound of heaven. He later admitted, "I had faced death without shaking, but that night I was trembling like a leaf."

He staggered to the altar in tears, and that night a muscular unsung hero fell to his knees and received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

In the story of the Red Sea, the Israelites followed the pillar of cloud and fire as carefully as possible, thrilled with their new freedom, full of excitement about the future. Yet as they followed Him, God deliberately led

them into a cul-de-sac between hostile hills, to the edge of a sea too deep to be forded and too wide to be crossed.

The unmistakable implication of Exodus 14:1–2 is that the Lord took responsibility for leading them into peril. He gave them specific, step-by-step instructions, leading them down a route to apparent ruin: *Turn and camp. Camp there. There, before the entrapping sea. Yes, right there in that impossible place.*

The Lord occasionally does the same with us, testing our faith, leading us into hardship, teaching us wisdom, showing us His ways. Our first reaction may be a surge of panic and a sense of alarm, but we must learn to consult the Scriptures for guidance.

So, take a deep breath and recall this deeper secret of the Christian life: *when you are in a difficult place, realize that the Lord either placed you there or allowed you to be there, for reasons perhaps known for now only to Himself.*

The same God who led you *in* will lead you *out*.

When You Find Yourself ...

"He knows the way He taketh," even if for the moment we do not.

—J. I. Packer

Our whole perspective changes when, finding ourselves in a hard place, we realize the Lord has either placed us there or allowed us to be there, perhaps for reasons presently known only to Himself.

On their first wedding anniversary, August 18, 1938, Russell and Darlene Deibler arrived in New Guinea to labor in the jungles for Christ. When the Japanese invaded the East Indies, the two were torn apart, and Russell was interned in a concentration camp where he died.

Darlene was imprisoned in another military camp where she suffered years of forced labor, indignity, near starvation, and afflictions such as beriberi,

dysentery, and intestinal worms.

One day she was singled out for execution. Shock troops took her to a death camp and directed her toward a stark cell. These words were written on the door in chalk: *Orang ini musti mati*, "This person must die." The guards shoved her in the cell, and as the door slammed shut, Darlene fell on her knees to peer through the keyhole. When she saw the key make a complete revolution, she knew she was as good as dead.

As the footsteps of the guard receded, she fell backward in a cold sweat, trembling, fighting off sheer terror. Just then she found herself singing a song she had learned as a child in Sunday school back in Iowa:

Fear not, little flock,
Whatever your lot;
He enters all rooms,
"The doors being shut."
He never forsakes,
He never is gone,
So count on His presence
In darkness and dawn.
("Only Believe" by Daniel Reader)

Darlene felt strong arms about her, and she knew that though her captors could lock her in, they could not lock out her wonderful Lord. She was in an impossible spot, but she was there with a God who does impossible feats. She was there in His will, and she knew that His will would never put her where His presence could not sustain her. That assurance bore her through impossible times and preserved her life despite impossible odds.

Consider these men and women who, through no fault of their own, found themselves beset with soul-disabling difficulties while trying to follow God:

Hagar, a single mom, was forced into the desert with her boy to die of thirst.

Joseph, wanting to fulfill divine dreams, was seized, stripped, sold as a slave, and imprisoned in Egypt.

Moses was caught between the splendors of Egyptian royalty and

thankless affliction with God's people.

David, being anointed by Samuel, was pursued by Israelite troops.

Hezekiah, seeking revival, was trapped by the most powerful army on earth, bent on annihilating his people.

The Lord's disciples sailed at His command on Galilee only to face a terror-filled night of storms and waves.

The Son of man Himself, fulfilling the Father's will, was nailed fast to wood and left to hang by His hands until dead.

The apostles, trying to preach this Crucified One, were horsewhipped.

The leader of that apostolic band later told his readers: "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

In other words, Christians shouldn't be surprised when, in seeking to do God's will, we find ourselves trapped in painful, frightening, difficult, or impossible situations. Life is hard—especially for Christians. We have a determined enemy seeking to devour us. "In the world," Jesus warned, "you will have tribulation" (John 16:33).

Then He added: "But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

God allows our faith to be tried, and He permits troubles to crowd into our lives. Sometimes they seem more than we can bear, but Christ can bear them. The first step toward "parted waters" is to frequently remind ourselves that the Lord has either put us in this difficult place or has allowed us to be there for reasons perhaps only He knows.

I've often wondered why my wife developed multiple sclerosis just as our children were leaving the nest. We had hoped to spend the last half of our marriage enjoying long-anticipated activities, such as traveling or golfing, that are now becoming difficult or impossible. Her struggles create struggles of my own, and occasionally I'm tempted to ask *why?*

But God has a purpose, and as hymnist William Cowper (pronounced

Cooper) put it, "God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain."

Years ago, I found this untitled and unattributed poem in a little volume by V. Raymond Edman titled *The Disciplines of Life*:

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man,
And skill a man
To play the noblest part;
When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!
How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him
Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands!
How He bends but never breaks
When his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
And with every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out—
God knows what He's about.

There are no mistakes in God's plan; Jesus does all things well. A. W. Tozer said, "To the child of God, there is no such thing as an accident. He travels an appointed way.... Accidents may indeed appear to befall him and misfortune stalk his way; but these evils will be so in appearance only and will seem evils only because we cannot read the secret script of God's hidden providence."

This idea is summed up in an incident in the life of South African pastor Andrew Murray, who once faced a terrible crisis. Gathering himself into his study, he sat a long while quietly, prayerfully, thoughtfully. Presently his

mind flew to his Lord Jesus. Picking up his pen, he wrote this in his journal:

First, He brought me here, it is by His will that I am in this strait place: in that fact I will rest.

Next, He will keep me here in His love, and give me grace to behave as His child.

Then, He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends me to learn, and working in me the grace He means to bestow.

Last, in His good time He can bring me out again—how and when He knows.

Let me say I am here,

(1) By God's appointment,

(2) In His keeping,

(3) Under His training,

(4) For His time.

Have you witnessed God's power in the past? Experienced His pardon? Enjoyed His presence? He who has carried you this far isn't going to drop you now.

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord,
And He delights in his way.
Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down;
For the Lord upholds him. (Ps. 37:23–24)

He has promised never to leave you or forsake you, never to forget, never to abandon. His love never ceases, and His care never dims.

So if you find yourself in a difficult spot, remember: you are there by God's appointment, in His keeping, under His training, and for His time.

And all evidence to the contrary, there's no better place to be.

What If It's My Fault?

Our God is a God who not merely restores, but takes up our mistakes and follies into His plan for us and brings good out of them.

—J. I. Packer

What if we have landed in this tough spot not because the Lord directly led us there, but because we followed our own noses? We sometimes cause our own pain. Our problems often result from sheer selfishness or stupidity. What then?

Serious and sincere repentance routes us back into God's will. Confession is like a shortcut from the wayward path back to the straight and narrow road of Christ. When we genuinely repent of our sins, they are cast as far from us as east from west. Our hearts are cleansed, and our fellowship with God is restored. Certain consequences may linger, but the Lord will somehow use even those for good. Healing will still be needed, but the Great Physician will apply the salve. He weaves everything together to advance His purposes.

God's forgiveness allows self-forgiveness. Have you ever read what Joseph told his brothers long after they had sold him into slavery? "Stop beating yourselves up over this," he said.

Joseph declared, "Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.... Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done" (Gen. 45:5; 50:19–20 NIV).

Self-forgiveness comes when we realize that if God has forgiven us, we needn't remain angry with ourselves, needn't hate ourselves any longer. God will use it all for good. According to Romans 8:28, "All things go on working together for the good of those who keep on loving God, who are called in accordance with God's purpose" (WILLIAMS).

"There is a compassionate adaptability about God's will for us," observed Sidlow Baxter. "Because we have not been in God's special will for us from the beginning, there is no reason why we should not get into it now. He can take up from where we get right."

After genuine confession and repentance, we can start wherever we are with Red Sea Rule #1: remember that God, in His overruling providence, has allowed you to be where you are at this moment.

One older commentator of Exodus 14 said, "When God fixes our position for us, we may rest assured that it is a wise and salutary one; and even when we foolishly and willfully choose a position for ourselves, He most graciously overrules our folly, and causes the influences of our self-chosen circumstances to work for our spiritual benefit."

Trust Him. He can still make a way.

Study Questions

1. Red Seas comes in all shapes and sizes. What's the Red Sea you're focusing on for this journey?
2. Why is life so hard? Why do problems persist? Why do we encounter these Red Seas?
3. Be honest—how have you been initially reacting to your own Red Sea experience, whatever it is?
4. How can embracing Rule #1 affect your response?

(For additional help, check out *The Red Sea Rules Study Guide* at www.redsearules.com.)

CHAPTER 2

Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief.

Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, "They are bewildered by the land; the wilderness has closed them in." Then I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his

army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord.

—Exodus 14:3–4

Asking the Right Question

If we could only look upon a difficult crisis as an occasion of bringing out, on our behalf, the sufficiency of divine grace, it would enable us to preserve the balance of our souls and to glorify God, even in the deepest waters.

—C. H. Mackintosh

In 1946, author Gertrude Stein felt very tired and ill during a car journey. Rushed to the American hospital at Neuilly, France, she was diagnosed with an advanced state of cancer. The surgeon operated, but it was too late. Gertrude passed away on the evening of July 27. Her last words baffled those around her. "What is the answer?" she asked. When nobody replied, she laughed to herself and said, "In that case, what is the question?"

Sometimes we can't find the answers to our dilemmas because we're asking the wrong questions. Perhaps, like Gertrude Stein, we find ourselves diagnosed with an incurable disease. Or we have a child in crisis, or we are facing a complicated legal problem. Maybe the money isn't there for college, or we're in a difficult relationship. Perhaps we've been jilted by a girlfriend or boyfriend—or spouse. Our natural instinct is to ask:

"How did I get into this mess, and how can I get out?"

"How quickly can I solve this problem?"

"Why did this have to happen to me?"

These are natural questions, but they may be the wrong ones to ask. There is a better approach, one that results in an entirely new way of looking at difficulties, that puts our problems into a different context and creates a new paradigm for dealing with tough situations.

The next time you're overwhelmed, instead of asking, "How can I get out of this mess?" try asking, "How can God be glorified in this situation?" One's perspective is entirely changed by the spiritual realities behind that approach. It's like switching on floodlights in a dark stadium.

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